

Rise in **suicide** leads politicians to pass new laws

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On a Facebook memorial page dedicated to Billy Lucas, one student apologizes for calling Lucas a “fag,” and another speaks about seeing students physically abuse Lucas in the school hallways.

Lucas, age 15, was found dead by his mother two weeks ago after he hung himself in the family’s barn in Greensburg, Ind. Reports said the severe bullying Lucas faced at school caused him to commit **suicide**.

This recent **suicide** has prompted state legislators to strengthen Indiana’s anti-bullying law.

State Sen. Tom Wyss, R-15th District, the creator of the 2005 law, said legislation should be tightened to prevent future tragedies. The current legislation allows local schools to put together their own policy system because, as Wyss said, no two schools are alike.

The government helps with the funding and training of the school safety specialists, and then the specialists go back to the schools and train the teachers and administrators, he said.

While some school districts have followed through and implemented successful programs, Wyss said many have failed to come up with concrete systems.

“It is very obvious to me the administrations have not followed through,” Wyss said. “I thought through the safety specialists, we took care of the teachers, but what we needed to do is take care of the administrators.”

Wyss said he is working with the Indiana Department of Education to ensure administrators are not only trained, but also understand their responsibilities.

Besides the administration, Wyss placed some of the blame for bullying incidents on parents.

“Not everything has to be done by the schools as far as the upbringing of children,” Wyss said. “Parents are responsible to put values and to put expectations in their children so when they go to school they are acting properly.”

Although some of the schools did not live up to the expectations set by the legislation, Wyss said no penalties were included in the law.

When the Indiana legislation is amended in January, he said schools who do not comply should expect serious consequences.

Although 44 states have anti-bullying laws, many of these laws are not comprehensive and lack specific definitions of what bullying entails, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

“If you pass a law that says bullying is not allowed, there is not a lot of guidance for teachers to rely on, and they don’t know how to implement policies,” said Jason Wallace, an IU law student and author of the paper “Bullycide in American Schools: Forging a Comprehensive Legislative Solution.”

The paper, which addresses “bullycide” — students committing **suicide** as a result of bullying — will be published in the winter edition of the Indiana Law Journal.

“If the legislation is not clear and detailed enough, then teachers don’t know what to do,” Wallace said.

On June 28, Illinois expanded anti-bullying laws to include harassment based on sexual orientation.

The new law also expanded the definition of bullying to include electronic harassment through texting or social networking sites.

“Our goal is to save lives through **suicide** prevention and of course, through better policies,” said Lindsay Anderson, legislative director for Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn. “The larger issue is to have more students stay in school successfully.”

Moreover, the law created a 15-person bullying prevention task force that will provide a detailed report about bullying prevention on March 1.

“Our state superintendent of education appointed members to this task force to further examine the policies and best practices from all over the country,” Anderson said.

Similar to Indiana’s law, Illinois requires school districts and private schools to

develop plans for bullying and gang prevention.

While some states have taken the initiative to implement strict anti-bullying legislation, Wallace said the real solution to the problem of “bullycide” is to implement federal anti-bullying legislation.

“If you leave it up to the states, a good chunk of them will never pass it on their own, and we need a federal system,” Wallace said. “Some state legislators say they don’t agree with homosexuality, and the goal of anti-bullying legislation is to push beyond that.”

In North Carolina, some Republicans criticized the anti-bullying legislation for protecting characteristics such as sexual orientation and attempted to amend the bill. While they were unsuccessful, a similar case in Minnesota, which attempted to expand existing anti-bullying legislation, led the governor to veto the bill.

Nevertheless, gays and lesbians are twice as likely to be victims of interpersonal violence, especially in their childhood, according to a 2010 study by the Harvard School of Public Health.

Currently, six states, including South Dakota, North Dakota, Michigan, Montana, Hawaii and Missouri, still lack anti-bullying laws.

“I would encourage other states to take a close look at these issues,” Anderson said. “I think that education is so important, and in order for students to learn, they need to feel safe in their environment.”